

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

April 5, 2006

U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops
3211 Fourth Street, NE
Washington, D.C. 20017-1194

Your Eminences and Excellencies:

We have worked closely with the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) on scores of issues for many years and look forward to continuing this relationship. Last November, many Members met with various USCCB members to discuss immigration reform. We renew the promise to keep communication open as Congress considers this complex and difficult issue.

We know you share both our frustration with the current immigration system and our interest in fixing this system in a fair and compassionate manner. Doing so will not be easy, particularly with many passionate and polarized viewpoints on this issue. Clearly, a thoughtful and respectful dialogue is needed on the issue if Congress and the public are to arrive at a consensus and implement a workable solution.

We supported the House border security legislation (H.R. 4437) in December because it would prevent illegal immigration, help our law enforcement agents gain control of our borders, and re-establish respect for our immigration laws. Though this legislation represents a solid first step in an effort to fix a broken immigration system, it will not be the final product on this issue.

Many of the most heinous atrocities occurring along the border involve human trafficking. We wholeheartedly concur with the USCCB's statement that:

- Human trafficking is a modern-day form of slavery. Victims of human trafficking are subjected to force, fraud, or coercion, for the purpose of sexual exploitation or forced labor. Examples of recent cases of human trafficking in the U.S. include adolescent Mexican girls trafficked to the U.S. for forced prostitution, Indian men trafficked for forced labor, and African women and children trafficked for domestic servitude, among others. The U.S. government estimates that approximately 600,000 to 800,000 people are trafficked across international borders each year; about 14,500-17,500 of them into the United States. Of those trafficked into the United States, it is estimated one-third are children. (Source: <http://www.usccb.org/news/index.shtml>)

Unfortunately, our current alien-smuggling laws are inadequate in the fight against these sophisticated coyotes and snake-heads who rape, rob, beat, and abandon their human "cargo," and also poison our communities through drug trafficking. Thus, border-area U.S. Attorneys – who every day prosecute these horrific crimes against humanity – have asked for the tools in H.R. 4437 to aid them in their fight against alien smuggling.

Since the House bill's passage, many have misconstrued the House's good-faith effort to bring

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human traffickers to justice as a way to criminalize humanitarian assistance efforts. The House bill does no such thing, nor did it intend to.

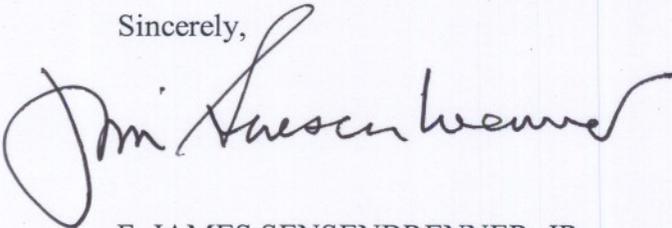
We can assure you, just as under current law, religious organizations would not have to “card” people at soup kitchens and homeless shelters under the House bill’s anti-smuggling provisions. Prosecutors would no sooner prosecute good Samaritans for “assisting” illegal immigrants to remain in the U.S. under the House bill than they would prosecute such persons for “encouraging” illegal immigrants to remain in the U.S. under current law, which has existed for nearly 20 years.

Nonetheless, we stand willing to work with you and other persons of good will to ensure humanitarian assistance efforts are not mistakenly ensnared in this moral effort to end suffering at the hands of human traffickers. We remain optimistic this goal can be achieved.

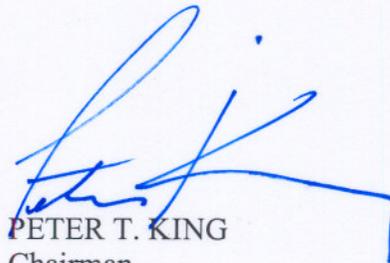
Lastly, we know many of you are concerned about the House bill’s provision making illegal presence a felony. We share that concern. As you should know, during the House debate, Chairman Sensenbrenner offered an amendment to reduce the bill’s penalty for illegal presence from a felony to a misdemeanor. Unfortunately, this amendment was unsuccessful, primarily because all but eight of our Democratic colleagues decided to play political games by voting to make all illegal immigrants felons. A felony penalty is neither appropriate nor workable. We remain committed to reducing this penalty and working with you to this end.

We take seriously the moral values legislators must demonstrate when discharging their public responsibilities. We sincerely hope we can work together in a cooperative manner for meaningful immigration reform that is fair, compassionate, and reflective of our shared values.

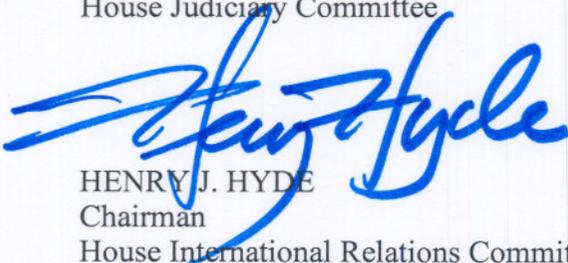
Sincerely,



F. JAMES SENSENBRENNER, JR.
Chairman
House Judiciary Committee



PETER T. KING
Chairman
House Homeland Security
Committee



HENRY J. HYDE
Chairman
House International Relations Committee